

Exuberant Avant-Garde

by Mark Finch

Warren Sonbert may be best known to readers as the *B.A.R.*'s abrasive and argumentative movie critic. It might come as a surprise to learn that Sonbert is also a filmmaker of international standing.

As a critic, his ambition is an honest one: to hold out for rigorous, intelligent, imaginative cinema (although his 1991 Ten Best list perversely included *Bugsy* and *LA Story*). Whatever you think of his opinions, he forces you to take sides.

As a filmmaker, he achieves the qualities he asks others to aspire to. On Jan. 20, the Roxie will be screening his two most recent works: *Friendly Witness* and *Short Fuse* are mood-altering marvels of editing and music.

Friendly Witness and *Short Fuse* are fast replays of footage shot by Sonbert since the '60s. The enduring effect is like being in a planetarium — on drugs — with a constellation of life's images passing overhead.

If you're new to their style, the two works together may seem rather indistinguishable, but *Friendly Witness* (1989) is the darker of the two (incorporating military footage), while *Short Fuse* — receiving its Bay Area premiere — is the lighter and more buoyant.

He edits shots against each other, as in *Friendly Witness'* darker sequences, where there's a montage of images of people physically assisting others — a kindly man helping someone who's fallen, a cop removing a passive protester.

The films never let you stop on a moment; relentlessly, they move on, trumping one image with another, like a grand, dizzy game of poker.

To this panorama, Sonbert adds a gripping music score: in *Friendly Witness*, running from "Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?" to a Gluck overture. Irony seems to bounce from each bar and to seep in through each clever cut.

anything into the pot: Vegas acts, fairgrounds, WWII scenes, folk dance, medical footage. Thrown into this mix, you begin to wonder what exactly Sonbert is trying to nail down.

On the one hand, he seems content to be a good-humored observer. Both films flash back to shots from an airplane's wing, as if all of life were merely passing below. Some sequences seem like a jolly, speeded-up vacation slide show.

At the same time, there's such a self-conscious range of images — some good, some bad — it's like being asked to renew your commitment to your life. Here it is, for better and worse; do you want to be in it or out of it?

Sonbert is also hard to pin down as a gay filmmaker. In an interview published last year in the *B.A.R.*, Sonbert paralleled being gay with a childlike exuberance, which he celebrates in his films.

I'm not convinced by the equation (although the films are like giddy carnival rides), and anyone looking for obvious gay images will be disappointed.

However, *Short Fuse* comes closest yet to being gay in content. In an early, repeated shot, two tanned men sit expectantly on a beach, as a wave rolls right over them. Later, Sonbert intercuts images of what seem like old flames, a fashion show and an SF ACT UP protest, to Laura Brannigan's "Gloria." It's a cheeky gay sensibility.

After more than 20 years of work, Sonbert must be used to the "experimental filmmaker" tag by now, yet his work is so energetic and playful, anyone can enjoy it.

You don't need training in experimental movies to get pleasure from Warren Sonbert's cinema. This is the nicest, most congenial kind of avant-garde you could hope to find. ▼